

Montgomery County proposes outside operator for golf course

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A Montgomery County task force charged with saving the Sligo Creek Golf Course at little or no cost to taxpayers is recommending looking to the private sector for a solution.

The hope is that someone will step forward to take over operations, make improvements at the course, cover expenses and turn a profit.

The report, made public Monday, suggests that the county's revenue authority should continue to operate Sligo until an alternative can be found. The agency could cut costs, the report said, by closing Sligo in winter and by getting golfers to raise funds to pay for improvements.

Among the problems: an aging clubhouse, antiquated irrigation system and facilities that are not in compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Sligo is one of a handful of inside-the-Beltway courses and the only nine-hole course remaining in Montgomery's publicly run system. Sligo backers say it has the most diverse clientele of any county course and caters to beginners and those who like an unhurried [environment](#).

The task force's findings were not supported by all members. Some wrote about their concerns, such as Keith Miller, head of the county's revenue authority. He has long maintained that Sligo is a money pit that cannot be sustained without substantial changes, including night lights and a driving range. Miller said the proposal for an outside operator "has a very small chance of success . . . and will continue to delay a true resolution of the situation." If an outside operator is brought in but not required to make improvements, he said, "it will only delay the long-term needs of the property and leave Sligo Creek in a tougher predicament than it is now."

Miller had proposed closing Sligo last fall, sparking an outcry from golfers and residents, which spurred politicians to look for ways to keep it afloat. The task force to study the course's future was set up after County Council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring) introduced a bill, and County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) asked the council to approve \$150,000 to keep the course open through June. Also challenging the conclusions were the county's recreation and parks advisory board, chaired by Donna W. Bartko. Bartko's group recommended that Sligo become a park.

"It is fruitless to pursue a third-party operator with the expectation that it would succeed where two competent agencies familiar with the course have failed," Bartko wrote. And parks chief Mary Bradford, whose agency would get the land back if Bartko's proposal

were accepted, said she preferred to keep Sligo a golf course, have the revenue authority remain in charge, and allow outside fundraising and more involvement by the community in managing the course.

The 17-member task force, chaired by Tedi Osias, a county housing official, said its members were not certain that they had been given a true picture by the revenue authority of Sligo's financial condition. Authority members estimate the course serves about 2,400 golfers.

The task force gave credence to golfers' claims in the past two years that the county revenue authority relied on an accounting system that appears to have been inherently unfair to Sligo, because the agency charged the small, unlit course the same management fees it does at larger courses with night lights, up to 27 holes and driving ranges. The revenue authority took over operation of Sligo in 2006, along with three other courses that had been run by the park system, adding them to six courses already run by the authority.

The task force report said that Sligo had been allowed to decline before it came under the authority, and its facilities were neglected "for a prolonged period of time; a majority of the task force believes that the county has an obligation to help pay for these repairs."

The county government is facing a potential \$600 million shortfall in its \$4.47 billion budget. Last week county officials, led by Leggett, made sweeping promises to build more classrooms in a school system that says many of its aging schools are bursting with students.

The issue will return to the County Council for further action.